Taking Control of Stress

Transcript and workbook
About Stress

Stress is more than just a headache or feeling tired or having high blood pressure.

Stress is the feeling you get when you try to balance the demands of work with the never-ending needs of family. Stress is being stuck in a traffic jam when you were supposed to be at work a half hour earlier. Stress is balancing your checkbook when the car needs repairs or the kids need new clothes and you’re already working two jobs. And stress is a trip to the dentist for a root canal, or forgetting your friend’s birthday, or being turned down for a job promotion that you know you deserve.

In short, stress is in your life everywhere you turn and it can affect you in very serious ways.

Stress is not all bad as long as you learn to control it and manage it. If you don’t have enough stress in your life you don’t feel motivated, you don’t feel stimulated. There’s no excitement. You don’t feel proud that you’ve overcome challenges or improved yourself.

Basically, without any stress in your life, you don’t have any reason to get out of bed in the morning and start living!

However, too much stress and your body starts to complain. You feel anxious and pressured. Your stomach gets in knots and you can’t think clearly. Too much stress means that you have too many challenges in your life or the few challenges that you do have are so significant that you believe they cannot be overcome.

Somewhere between these extremes, in a place between too little stress and too much stress, is an amount of stress that is healthy, motivating, and stimulating. That’s the level of stress you want to achieve and that’s the level of stress that you can achieve when you learn the strategies that are taught in this course.

Are you at risk of unhealthy stress?

Everyone reacts to different situations in different ways. However, there are some common events that each of us experience as stressful.

- I find it difficult to give or receive affection regularly.
- I do not exercise regularly.
- I do not have any friends to confide in about personal matters.
- I find it difficult to speak openly about my feelings when I’m angry or worried.
- I do not have enough time or money to satisfy my needs.
- I currently have a heavy debt.
- I suffer from a serious illness or injury.
- I have conflicts with people close to me.
- I have sexual conflicts or frustration.
- There has been a recent death of a person close to me.
- I have recently experienced a separation or divorce.
- My child is leaving home.
- I have a child to care for with a behaviour or learning problem.
- My parents or in-laws are moving in with me or I am moving in with them.
- I, or someone close to me, is in trouble with the law.
- I am a victim of crime.
- I am dealing with an unwanted pregnancy.
- I’m trying to modify my addictive behaviour (e.g. stop smoking).
- I have too many responsibilities and/or deadlines.
- I have too much or too little contact with people.
- There is limited opportunity for advancement and/or inadequate pay.
- I have limited control over my workload and/or decisions affecting my job.
- I experience a lot of hassles or interruptions preventing me from doing my work.
- I have conflicts with co-workers, management, and/or customers.
- I have recently lost my job or I feel that my job is insecure due to layoffs, downsizing, or reorganization.
Sources of stress

There are many sources of stress. The source of stress is called a “stressor.” Some stressors are environmental; they come from your environment. Things like ‘not having enough time’ or financial problems or working in a place that is noisy or too hot or too cold.

Some stressors are psychological or emotional: things like arguments, or conflicts that you have with family and friends and co-workers, or feeling worried or pressured.

Some stressors come from your body. Things like allergies and infections and physical problems like back pain or cancer or a repetitive strain injury.

And some stressors come from you. Like pushing yourself too hard or trying to be perfect at everything that you’re doing or not feeling confident. Or being too busy and never being able to say “no.”

Some stressors are even positive things like getting a job promotion or getting married. These are things that you look forward to, but they’re still stressful.

Regardless of the source of stress it’s always important to be sure that you keep stress at a manageable and comfortable level. And that you don’t ignore the signs and symptoms that your stress is getting out of hand.

Symptoms of stress

You may be experiencing an unhealthy amount of stress and not even know it. That’s because stress can affect you in a variety of ways and sometimes these ways are not very easy to notice. However, if you don’t take control of your stress, sooner or later you may develop some very serious symptoms.

So it’s important to look for signs of stress before they get out of hand. Basically, stress can affect you in four parts of your life—your body, your thinking, your emotions, and your behaviour (including your work life and your social relationships).

Some of the signs and symptoms of stress are found in the following list. Take a look at the list and see if you recognize any of the signs of stress in yourself. Although any one of these symptoms by itself may not be a problem, if you recognize more than a few than it is very important that you take steps to do something about it.

Note: These signs and symptoms are not specific to stress. Some of these symptoms exist with other health or medical problems. Thus, it is important to seek professional advice if you are concerned about them. For example, visit your family physician and discuss your symptoms with him or her. They will consider these symptoms along with your medical history, and their own observations of your physical health, and help you take the most appropriate plan of action.
Signs and symptoms of stress

Your reactions to stress can appear in a variety of different ways. Some of these changes may be obvious and some not. In short, stress will appear as changes in your body (e.g. a headaches), thoughts (e.g. forgetfulness), emotions (e.g. feeling irritable), and behaviour (e.g. overeating). Some of the signs of stress are found in the following lists. One of these symptoms by itself may not represent a problem. However, if you are experiencing many of these symptoms, you may be experiencing a reaction to stress and this may be affecting your health. So it is important to take steps to control your stress.

**Stress can appear as changes in your body:**
- Muscle tension in your jaw or forehead
- Digestive changes such as constipation or diarrhea
- Dry throat
- Fatigue
- High blood pressure
- Headaches
- Indigestion or upset stomach
- Muscle aches
- Increased heart rate or heart pounding
- Shortness of breath
- Perspiration and sweaty hands
- Pain in the neck or lower back
- Loss of appetite or overeating
- Itchy skin rashes
- Stomach ulcers
- Frequent urination
- Sleeping problems

**Stress can appear as changes in your feelings:**
- Moodiness
- Feeling blue, down, or hopeless
- Feeling irritable or angry
- Feeling anxious or agitated or “on edge”
- Feeling scared
- Feeling resentment or cynicism
- Depression

**Stress can appear as changes in your thinking:**
- Low self-esteem or self-confidence
- Difficulty concentrating
- Preoccupation with thoughts or tasks
- Worrying (about the past, present, or future)
- Forgetfulness or poor memory
- Poor judgment
- Inability to tolerate pressure
- Thoughts racing through your mind
- Pessimism or negative thinking

**And stress can appear as changes in your behaviour:**
- Increased smoking
- Increased use of drugs and alcohol
- Nail biting
- Neglecting your responsibilities
- Poor job performance
- Increase in absenteeism
- Unusually poor hygiene
- Fidgeting
- Non-stop talking
- Acting impulsively
- Being accident prone
- Eating too little or too much
- Grinding your teeth
- Startling easily
- Crying for no apparent reason
- Avoiding other people
- Being argumentative or abusive
- Complaining a lot

Do you recognize any of these signs or symptoms of stress in yourself? If you recognize any of them, it suggests that you might be experiencing an unhealthy level of stress and you should take steps to control or manage it.
Tools for controlling stress

Once you learn to recognize your symptoms of stress you are one step closer to controlling and reducing it!

Controlling your stress is more than just learning to relax. Controlling stress is about taking steps to balance the negative stress in your life with more positive experiences so that you can maintain a healthy mind and a healthy body. This means learn ways to relax your body, manage your thinking and feelings, increase the positive experiences of your life, manage your time better, and get active.

This section contains several exercises to help you learn to control your stress. Go ahead and choose one of the exercises and give it a try. For each of the exercises, you can do them online or you can print a copy to do on your own time. When you start each exercise, there will be instructions for you to follow. Be sure to read the instructions carefully and be sure to practice the exercise for at least two weeks and see how much it helps you.

There is also a stress improvement journal. The stress improvement journal will help you keep track of your progress in taking control of your stress. It doesn’t matter which of the stress management strategies you choose to try first, just be sure that you keep track of your progress with this journal.

You can always try a different strategy or combine two or more of them together. In fact, the more strategies you learn and practice, the better able you will be to control your stress!

I. Reduce Tension

Stress-related tension is an almost inevitable part of everyday living. Apart from being an uncomfortable burden, stress-related tension can lead to a variety of problems such as headaches, back pain, and exhaustion, to name a few.

Despite the fact that each of us may experience tension slightly differently, anyone can learn to release that tension. All it takes is:

- knowing how to relax,
- practicing relaxation techniques, and
- choosing a technique that works best for you

The following steps present different relaxation options. Experiment with them until you find the most effective method of relaxation for you. Alternatively, use different techniques on different occasions.

Note: Each of these techniques is presented with step-by-step instruction. Until you master the exercise, you may want to make an audio recording to help direct you.
Reduce tension: Identify areas of tension

Before you begin to relax you should first determine where you hold tension in your body. For some people, this may be the head, neck or back. For others, it may be the stomach, etc..

Close your eyes and ask yourself what sounds you are aware of.
For example, are you aware of the sound of traffic outside your window?
Or perhaps the sound of someone talking far off in the distance?
Or the sound of a radio or a television in another room?
Take note of the sounds that are around you,
And slowly shift your attention to your body and to your physical state.
Start with your head and work down towards your toes,
Mentally scanning your body and taking note of your body’s sensations.
For example, perhaps you are aware of a slight itch at the back of your neck,
Or a tightness in your abdomen.
Once you have scanned your entire body for any areas of tension,
Open your eyes and take a mental note of where you tend to hold tension in your body.
Reduce tension: Identify your breathing pattern

Deep, full, relaxed breathing is a powerful and profound way of releasing tension and controlling stress. To become aware of your pattern of breathing, try the following.

Place one of your hands upon your stomach somewhere around your belly button area,
Then place the other hand on your chest, right in the centre.
And for the next few moments, as you sit still and breathe normally,
Take note of the pattern of movement of your two hands.
As you breathe in and breathe out, does one hand move more than the other?
Does the lower hand move more than the upper hand?
Does the upper hand move more than the lower hand?
Do both hands move at about the same amount?

If your upper hand moves more than your lower hand, you are breathing in a short and shallow fashion that will contribute to stress.

If your lower hand moves more than your upper hand, you are breathing in a deep and full fashion and this will help manage your stress.

As you take a few more moments to notice your breathing try to breathe in deeply and exhale fully so that you feel your lower hand moving inwards and outwards.

Spend a few moments practicing this full deep relaxed breathing, using the movements of your hands as a sign that can tell you whether or not you are breathing in a relaxed fashion or a stressed fashion.
Reduce tension: Breathe to relax

Try this breathing technique that is designed to help you relax and release tension.

Once you have practiced this technique a few times each day over the course of one week, you will be able to call upon your skill of relaxed breathing anywhere at anytime. You do not have to lie down to do this, the purpose of lying down in the early stages is just to be sure that you recognize when you are breathing deeply and that you train yourself to do so at will.

**Lie on the floor, or sit comfortably in a chair, with one hand resting around your stomach area, and with the other hand resting somewhere near the top of your chest.**

Close your eyes and bring your attention to your breathing.

Breathe slowly and fully through your nose to a very slow count such as this:

Breathe in and hold….one…two…three….and breathe out….one…two….three.

As you inhale try to focus on causing your lower hand to move up and down with each full breath inwards.

Be sure that you breathe deeply enough that you expand your abdomen and feel your lower hand moving inwards and outwards.

Each time you breathe in, pause for a moment when your lungs are full and then slowly exhale through your lips…

Again, to a slow count of one…two…three.

As you exhale try to focus on moving your lower hand move inwards towards your back as if you are pulling inward
And feel your lower back pressing towards the floor or into the back of your chair,

Be sure that you expel all of the air from the bottom of your lungs…allowing your hands to collapse naturally inwards towards your body,

Repeat this five or six times…each time inhaling slowly and fully and exhaling slowly and fully,

**A modified version for daily use is as follows:**

Sit comfortably in a chair.

Breathe in deeply and slowly and say to yourself “breathe in relaxation.”

After pausing for a moment, breathe out fully from your abdomen and say to yourself “and release tension.” Pause again before you inhale.

Use this technique on any occasion when you want to release tension (e.g. while sitting in traffic, standing in line, while waiting on the telephone “on hold”, etc.).
Reduce tension: Relax your muscles

A good technique to relax your entire body is to alternately tense and relax each of the major muscle groups in your body, as you breathe deeply and fully. With this technique, you need to alternate between tension and relaxation. Specifically, try to make your muscles tense, holding that tension for a few moments, and then, all at once, release the tension while thinking to yourself “relax.”

The point of this exercise is to first cause yourself to experience tension, hold that tension, and suddenly release it. You will find that this helps you attain a more relaxed state than if you simply try to relax from a normal, non-tensed position (it’s kind of like swinging a pendulum...to get the pendulum to swing far to one side, you first pull it far to the other side and let go).

A couple of important points:

- When you release the tension in the muscles, let it go all at once, not slowly. Let your muscles become suddenly limp.
- Be cautious about tensing your muscles too much (especially those in your neck and back). As well, over tightening your feet muscles can lead to a cramp.
- Most people have only limited success when they first try this exercise. However, once you practice this twice a day for two weeks (e.g. upon awakening and upon going to sleep) you will find that you can use it to attain a more relaxed state than you have ever experienced. It is a profoundly powerful technique of relaxation once you become skilled at it.
Sit in a comfortable chair and curl both hands into fists
At the same time, tightening your forearms and your biceps.

Hold the tension for a few moments.

Keep holding and all at once…let go of the tension…just…relax.

Let’s do that one more time.

Tighten curl both hands into fists, tighten your forearms and your biceps, and hold the tension for a few moments.

Keep holding and all at once, let the tension go…and just relax.

Next, wrinkle your face, almost as if you are smelling something awful…purse your lips…and raise your eyebrows.

Now hold this tension in your face for a few moments…keep holding…continuing to breathe normally…

And all at once, let the tension go…just, relax.

Let’s do that one more time.

Wrinkle your face, almost as if you are smelling something awful…purse your lips…and raise your eyebrows.

Now hold this tension in your face for a few moments…keep holding…continuing to breathe normally…

And all at once, let the tension go…just, relax.

Next, slightly round your back and tighten your abdomen, keep breathing normally, and hold this for a few moments, then all at once let the tension go, and relax.

Let’s do that again.

Slightly round your back and tighten your abdomen, keep breathing normally, and hold this for a few moments, then all at once let the tension go, and relax.

Finally, tense your feet by lifting your toes upward, tightening your shins.

Hold this for a few moments, breathing normally, and all at once, let the tension go, and relax.

And one more time.

Tense your feet by lifting your toes upward, tightening your shins.

Hold this for a few moments, breathing normally, and all at once, let the tension go, and relax.

Now spend a few moments focusing on your deep relaxed breathing and paying allowing all of the muscles in your body to relax…just let the tension flow away from you…with each breath inwards, breathe in feelings of relaxation and calm…...and with each breath outwards, release any tension and any stress.
Reduce tension: Visualization

Your imagination is a powerful tool to help you relax. It simply involves pairing a peaceful, relaxing image with another relaxation technique (e.g. visualization paired with relaxed breathing).

Keep in mind:

• When using visualization try using all of your senses. Imagine what your peaceful scene sounds like, what it smells like, what you can feel.
• Be sure that you are free from other distractions or interruptions for the period that you are doing the relaxation exercise (e.g. turn off your pager, put a “do not disturb” sign on your door).
• Visualization is fun. Let your imagination run free and wild. You can imagine anything you want.

Try the following.

Lie down, close your eyes, and relax. Take slow, deep breaths, and, as you spend a few minutes in this position, think about any of the following:

Warm, beautiful colors, fading from one hue to another (e.g. a warm red fading to a pale blue).

A beach scene, with the palms swaying gently in the warm breeze and the ocean waves lapping against white sand.

A favorite image from the present or your childhood (e.g. watching your puppy bounce through some tall grass).

Any special place that holds meaning and peace for you.
Reduce tension: Action plan

To master a technique of relaxation you need to practice. The goal of practicing relaxation is to become so skilled at relaxing that you can invoke a relaxed state whenever and wherever you need to.

**Step 1. Choose a relaxation technique**

Choose a technique of relaxation, or a combination of techniques (e.g. breathing or a combination of breathing and visualization). Use the space below to record your choice.

**Step 2. Identify obstacles**

What might interfere with trying your chosen technique of relaxation (e.g. motivation, forgetfulness, unsure how to relax)?

Describe your potential obstacles in the space below and how you will deal with them if they arise. For example: “My biggest obstacle is that I will forget to practice. So I will post a reminder by my bed that I will see before getting out of bed in the morning, and upon going to bed at night.”

**Step 3. Track your progress**

Successful change requires that you track your progress so that you know when you are being successful at relaxation.

At the end of this section there is a relaxation practice log that you can use to keep track of your progress. If you prefer, you can keep track of your progress in a notebook or journal of your choosing. Whatever method you choose, be sure that your practice log contains a measure of your state of relaxation before and after your practice session.

**Step 4. Reward yourself**

Finally, a good action plan includes a reward to celebrate your success. How will you reward your progress? How often will you reward yourself?

For example: “When I finish my first week of practice, I will reward myself by going out to a fun movie with a friend.”
# Relaxation Practice Log

Use this 10-point scale before and after you practice a relaxation technique.

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<th>0</th>
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<th>4</th>
<th>6</th>
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<td>Not at all stressed.</td>
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<td>Completely calm.</td>
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<td>Extremely stressed.</td>
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<td>Most stress I have felt.</td>
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<th>Tension (before)</th>
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II. Stay Connected

Have you ever experienced a time in your life when you were so involved and passionate about something or someone that nothing else seemed to matter...you felt as if you could take on the world...your energy level was high...and nothing could get you down?

That’s what “staying connected” is about. And ‘staying connected’ is a powerful way to fuel your spirit and keep you happy, healthy, and energized.

This section is about staying connected to people and passion. It is about discovering what is important in your life, rekindling passion that you may have lost, and staying connected to the people and activities that provide meaning and support to you.

Staying connected requires that you:

1. Identify what gives meaning to your life.
2. Rekindle passions and connections. And,
3. Spend time with people who support you.

Step 1: Identify what gives meaning to your life

The very first step to ‘stay connected’ is to identify what gives meaning to your life. What are your passions? What gives your life meaning? For each of the following categories, describe the people or activities that contribute meaning and passion to your life.

**Relationships.** For example partner/spouse, children, family members, good friends, co-workers, old friends, customers.

**Self-expression.** For example hobbies and interests, painting, music, gardening, writing, building, creating, discussion groups, dressing to suit yourself.

**Spiritual or religious involvement.** For example church, faith group, God.

**Community involvement.** For example, volunteer work, participating in community activities, joining with neighbors, supporting charities.

**Art and creativity.** For example, attending musical events or theatre, visiting art galleries, creating your own art, playing a musical instrument, contributing to the arts, learning about art.

**Nature.** For example, hiking outdoors, gardening, walking and absorbing the sights and sounds.
Step 2: Rekindle passions and connections

Consider the people or activities that you’ve just identified as being important and giving meaning to your life and list three passions or connections that you want to grow or continue to keep alive in your life. For example, you may enjoy walks in nature but you may not have taken the time for a nature walk in the past decade. Or perhaps you find artistic expression important but you have no current outlet for expressing yourself.

**Below, identify the top three passions or connections you want to rekindle or keep alive.**

Passion/Connection 1:

Passion/Connection 2:

Passion/Connection 3:

Now that you have picked three passions or connections that you want to rekindle, pick one of these and, below, describe exactly what steps you will take this upcoming week to rekindle or revive it. Be very specific.

For example, if you want to rekindle a passion for music, you could write “I will look up the times of a musical performance in my local theatre and attend that performance with a friend.”
Step 3: Spend time with people who support you

Now that you have identified the people and activities that help give meaning to your life, and taken steps to rekindle those passions, you need to plan to spend time with people who are supportive of you.

Think about this: Who can you depend on for support? Who do you feel comfortable talking with? Who handles challenging situations better than you (so you can follow their example)?

Write the name(s) below.

Think about how you are going to contribute to that relationship. What do you have to offer to help further the bond that you have together and show your appreciation for that supportive relationship? How can you contribute meaningfully to the relationship (e.g. express your gratitude to the person, do something you know they will appreciate)? Record your thoughts below.

Finally, learn from others who are passionate. Select someone who is passionate about what they do and who seems energized and uplifted and optimistic. Think about the following:

1. How does this person describe their interests and passions?

2. What happens to this person's face or voice when they talk about their passion? Do they become filled with colour and life?

3. What can you learn from this person that you can apply to your own life?

4. How can you begin to surround yourself with people who have passion for life?
III. Manage Your Thinking

What is going through your mind when you are experiencing distress, feeling down, or upset. Are you saying to yourself “This is awful, I don’t deserve this,” “I’m never going to get through this,” “I can’t stand this anymore”?

These thoughts (i.e. the things you are saying to yourself) have a powerful influence over your mood and your behaviour. Specifically, your own thoughts can make you feel frustrated, distraught, anxious, or powerless, and they can lead you to withdraw, stop trying to change, etc. However, in similar fashion, your thoughts can improve your mood, fuel your confidence, and propel you to take positive, constructive action.

So it’s important to change negative, unreasonable, and/or inaccurate thoughts into positive, optimistic, and accurate ones.

**Negative thoughts:**

- Foretell failure, suffering, or disappointment (e.g. ‘things will only get worse’).
- Negatively evaluate a thing or another person (e.g. ‘he is an idiot’).
- Generalize about things (e.g. ‘I am a failure’ or ‘I can’t escape my past’).

**Positive thoughts:**

- Are optimistic (e.g. ‘I am going to succeed; ‘things will turn out okay’).
- Positively evaluate a thing or another person (e.g. ‘that’s a great idea’).
- Are realistic (e.g. ‘I can cope with this even if I make a mistake’).

**Begin by clearing your mind**

The first step towards changing your thinking is to pause for a moment and calm yourself. This will help clear your mind of negative thoughts and leave you open to other ways of thinking and being more reasonable about the situation you are in. Try the following:

**Lie on the floor, or sit comfortably in a chair.**

*Close your eyes and bring your attention to your breathing.*

*Breathe slowly and fully through your nose to a very slow count such as this:*

*Breathe in and hold….one…two…three….and breathe out….one…two….three.*

*Be sure that you breathe deeply enough that you expand your abdomen fully.*

*Each time you breathe in, pause for a moment when your lungs are full and then slowly exhale through your lips…*

*Again, to a slow count of one…two…three.*

*As you exhale try to focus on moving lower back pressing towards the floor or into the back of your chair.*

*Be sure that you expel all of the air from the bottom of your lungs…*

*And repeat this five or six times…each time inhaling slowly and fully and exhaling slowly and fully.*

To aid in clearing you mind, try visualizing a pleasant scene (e.g. a tropical beach or a balloon floating upwards into the sky).

Now that your mind is clear, try the action plan that follows.
Change your thinking: Action plan

Step 1. Check your thinking

Check whether your thoughts are reasonable and positive. Ask yourself questions like these:

- Is what I am thinking 100% true?
- Have I ever experienced something that proves what I am thinking is not true?
- Am I being reasonable?
- Am I blaming myself for something over which I have no control?
- Am I jumping to conclusions?
- What am I afraid might happen?

What do you conclude about your thinking?

Step 2. Replace negative thoughts with positive thoughts

To replace negative thoughts with positive, optimistic, and hopeful thoughts, ask yourself questions like these:

- What would I tell my best friend if they were thinking this way?
- What is a more positive, realistic way of thinking about this situation?
- What can I begin to tell myself that will help me feel better?
- When I coped well with something like this in the past, what did I tell myself then?

What do you conclude? Write a more positive, optimistic, hopeful thought for yourself in the space below.

Step 3. Change your thinking: Get some perspective

If you have trouble changing your own thinking, try getting some perspective on it. Try to step back from your own point of view and see if you can think of other possible ways to look at the situation you are in. Try any of the following:

A. Talk to a supportive friend

Tell them what you are experiencing and thinking.

- What do they say?
- What is their reaction?
- Do they say things that contradict your thoughts?
B. Find someone who is in a similar situation and who is coping well

Ask them what they are saying to themselves to help them cope.

C. Write your thoughts down

Write your thoughts down on a piece of paper (e.g. a journal or diary). This helps you release the tension associated with your thoughts and see them more objectively. Look at what you’ve written and see if you can find something to change about it.

Step 4. Put new thinking into action

Once you have identified your negative, stressful thinking and come up with new ways of thinking, you need to put these new thoughts into practice in your life.

Create a positive, realistic, optimistic statement that you can tell yourself.

For example: “The next time I start to feel distraught about my situation I will tell myself “I am going to be okay. I will rise above this.”

Step 5. Identify obstacles

What might interfere with using your new, positive thoughts (e.g. motivation, forgetfulness, unsure how to be positive)? Describe your potential obstacles in the space below and how you will deal with them if they arise.

For example: “My biggest obstacle is that I will forget to use my positive self-talk. So I will plan to use my positive self-talk beforehand.”
Step 6. Track your progress

Successful change requires that you track your progress so that you know when you are being successful at changing your thinking. How will you keep track of your progress?

Write the details of what you can do below.

For example: keep a journal or daily diary, write down your positive thoughts every time you use them, post a “calendar of success” on your refrigerator, etc.

Step 7. Reward yourself

Finally, a good action plan includes a reward to celebrate your success. How will you reward your progress? How often will you reward yourself?

For example: “The next time I remember to use positive thoughts, I will buy myself a fun magazine to read” or “at the end of each week I’ll reward myself by attending a movie with a friend.”
IV. Manage Your Feelings

When feeling distressed or upset, we sometimes let our emotions and feelings determine our behaviour. In other words, we let our feelings (anger, sadness, guilt, despair, anxiety, etc.) dictate or determine our behaviour (the things we do, the actions we take). For example “I feel so stressed that I need to overeat” or “I'm so angry I'm going to yell.”

When feelings determine behaviour, you are living your life by your emotion. You are ‘emotion-centered.’

Rather than let feelings determine behaviour, try becoming more ‘action-centered.’ In other words, focus on what you need to do in a situation despite any temporary feeling(s) you may have.

Action-centered living means that you acknowledge your feelings and learn from them (e.g. “why am I feeling this way?”, “what does my emotion tell me about my situation and what I need to do?”). Once you know why you are feeling a certain way, you then decide upon the best action to take in that situation—what would help resolve the feeling or contribute in a positive way to the situation.

For example, if you are angry, don't yell (emotion-centered). Instead, take a breath, relax for a moment, and then calmly try to resolve the situation (action-centered).

Or, if you are anxious, don't avoid the situation (emotion-centered). Instead, think about why you are feeling anxious (e.g. “I am worried that I will not do a good job”) and take steps to prepare yourself or do whatever is most helpful in that situation.

Or, if your mood is low, don't withdraw from life. Instead, say to yourself “I don't feel like doing anything right now, but, despite that, I'm going to go outside and walk for 15 minutes”).

**Step 1. Identify the ‘emotion-centered’ situation**

First, identify a situation in which your feelings determine your actions.

Using the space below, describe a situation that occurred in the past week where you felt a strong emotion (a situation where you felt stressed and reacted a certain way because of those feelings).

Consider: Who was involved? What did you do? What were the circumstances?

Example 1: “Last week, I was so angry at my husband after he stayed out late drinking with his friends that I yelled at him.”

Example 2: “I heard someone criticize my work and it made me very unhappy. I stopped what I was doing and just sat there for the rest of the afternoon without actually doing anything.”
Step 2. Describe your feelings in that situation

The next step is to describe your feelings in that situation. What were you feeling? What were you thinking? What did you fear might happen? What were you experiencing? Use the space below.

Example 1: “I was feeling very angry. I felt as if I was being neglected because my husband didn’t phone me let me know he would be out with his friends. I felt as if I came second in his life.”

Example 2: “I was feeling worthless. I felt as if the work I was doing was of poor quality and that I might as well stop doing it altogether.”

Step 3. Describe what you would do differently if you did not feel the same way

The next step is to describe the action you would have taken if you were in that same situation but not feeling the same way. Imagine what you would do if you were completely calm and free of any negative or unwanted feelings.

Example 1: “If I wasn’t feeling neglected, and angry, I wouldn’t have yelled at him when he got home. Instead, I would have told him that I would like him to call first. I might also have talked about how I really want to feel like I come first in his life and that sometimes it doesn’t seem that way.”

Example 2: “If I wasn’t feeling worthless, I would have continued doing my work the way I usually do… I certainly wouldn’t have sat there wasting time and feeling sorry for myself.”

Use the space below to describe what you would have done differently in that same situation if you were not experiencing the unwanted or uncomfortable feeling(s).

Step 4. Learn from feelings

What can you learn from your feelings? What does your feeling or experience in that situation say about you? What is the message that your feeling(s) were (or are) giving you? What does this say about you? About your situation? About what you need to do differently?

Example 1: “I’m learning that I need a lot of reassurance and that I’m not really angry at him. I’m also learning that he really does love me but he doesn’t always know how I feel. Maybe I can work on my need for reassurance and maybe, together, we can work out something that will help us communicate better.”

Example 2: “I’m learning that I need to be less sensitive to what other people think and instead trust my own judgement. I’m learning that I take one person’s opinion and allow that to ruin my mood. I can think of other people who like me for who I am.”

Think about the questions and use the space below to record your answer and thoughts.
Step 5. Take constructive action

Now that you have identified how you could have behaved differently and now that you have decided what you can learn from your feeling(s) in that situation, ask yourself: “How can I act differently if that same situation arises again?”

Example 1: “If this happens again, I’m going to ask myself whether or not I’m really angry at him because I need reassurance, or because he is being truly inconsiderate. And I’m not going to yell at him about drinking with his friends because that’s not really the issue. I’m also going to ask him to let me know if he’s going to be staying out late, so I can plan my time, too, and we can both have a good time.”

Example 2: “If this happens again, I’m going to ask myself if I’m exaggerating one person’s opinion and whether or not that opinion is worth getting upset about. And I’m going to remind myself that I do good work.”

Step 6. Identify any obstacles

What might interfere with acting differently in that situation if it arises again, or if you feel that same way again (e.g. motivation, forgetfulness, unsure how to behave differently)? Describe your potential obstacles in the space below and how you will deal with them if they arise.

For example: “My biggest obstacle is that my feelings will overcome me. If I feel that this is happening, I will take a few deep breaths to clear my mind and decide what I should be doing.”

Step 7. Track your progress

Successful change requires that you track your progress so that you know when you are being successful at changing your thinking. How will you keep track of your progress? Write the details of what you can do below.

For example: keep a journal or daily diary, write down your accomplishments every time they happen (e.g. whenever you do something constructive and helpful in a situation rather than act upon your temporary feeling), post a “calendar of success” on your refrigerator, etc.

Step 8. Reward yourself

Finally, a good action plan includes a reward to celebrate your success. How will you reward your progress? How often will you reward yourself?

For example: “The next time I do something positive and constructive, rather than act on the whim of how I feel, I will buy myself a fun magazine to read” or “at the end of each week I’ll reward myself by attending a movie with a friend.”
V. Manage Your Time

Is your idea of managing time simply ‘doing more with less’ or ‘finding an extra hour in the day’?

Managing your time is more than just doing more with less time…and there are only 24 hours in a day, no matter how you look at it.

Managing time is a creative and conscious combination of:

1. Spending time on activities that give value to your life,
2. Organizing your time to get the most out of the 24 hours you have in a day. and
3. Becoming aware of how much influence you really have over how you spend your time in any given day.

Some of the problems associated with poor time management are:

- constant rushing
- feeling distressed, tense, anxious
- frequent lateness
- low productivity, energy, and motivation
- frustration
- impatience
- difficulty setting and achieving goals

Recognize any of these in yourself? If so, try the following steps:

Step 1: Take stock of how you ‘spend’ your time.
Step 2: Identify what you want to spend your time on.
Step 3: Align your time expenditure with your values (from step 2)
Step 4: Get organized.

Step 1: Take stock of how you spend your time

The first step towards time management is to keep track of how you ‘spend’ your time. Use the Daily Time Log.

Take note of how you are spending each and every hour of the day. When you are finished each day’s log, the total amount of time for your activities should be fairly close to the total number of hours you were awake.

Do this time log for one week. You might want to categorize your activities (e.g. checking voice mail, traveling to/from work, eating, daydreaming, personal hygiene, child care, chores, television, hobbies, exercising, etc.).

Keep in mind that the purpose of a time log is to help you take an honest look at how you spend your time. The more accurate you are, the better able you will be to make changes.
Sample Time Log

Keep a time log of your daily activities for one week. This will help you better understand how you spend your time and on what. Try recording your activities for the previous hour on every changing hour (e.g. at 2 p.m., stop for a moment and record what you were doing from 1 p.m. until 2 p.m.). Alternatively, make a note in the time log every time you change an activity. Whichever method you choose, be sure to record your time accurately to make it easier to modify later, and to ensure that you have an accurate record of your time spent.

**Day of the week:**

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Step 2. Identify your values

What do you want to spend your time doing? What is worthwhile to you? What do you need or want to do that will contribute meaningfully to work, family, relationships, and personal growth?

Consider your top 10 values and record these below. Consider what is valuable and meaningful for you to ‘spend’ your time doing. Need some ideas or prompting? Look at the following list.

What do you value?

To help prompt your thinking about values, here are some suggestions. Look through this list and see if any of these values inspire thoughts of your own or help you determine your own values and priorities.

☐ Achievement or advancement  ☐ Helping to better society
☐ Adventure  ☐ High quality standards
☐ Being in control of work  ☐ Honesty
☐ Courtesy and civility  ☐ Innovation
☐ Creativity  ☐ Keeping my job
☐ Democratic work environment  ☐ Keeping promises
☐ Earning a decent living  ☐ Legacy for the future
☐ Environmental concern  ☐ Maintaining dignity
☐ Equal opportunity  ☐ Personal growth and development
☐ Fame  ☐ Profitability
☐ Flexible work conditions  ☐ Respect
☐ Free expression  ☐ Responsible reporting
☐ Fun  ☐ Return on Investment
☐ Good customer relations  ☐ Safety
☐ Good reputation  ☐ Serving God
☐ Health  ☐ Serving others
Step 3: Make a plan to better align your time

Once you know how you spend your time you can compare this with your values and priorities (from step one). This will help you decide what changes you can, and should make. Consider your observations from your daily time log and the values you say are important to you.

Ask yourself these questions and note your observations below.

- Which activities on my time log are in line with my values and priorities?
- Which activities are not in line with my values and priorities?
- Are any of my values being neglected?

Then, consider these questions and record your response below.

- What can I change about myself or the structure of my day to better align my time with my values?
- What can I give up spending time on to devote time to something else?

Step 4: Organize your time

Finally, consider the things you can do to better organize your time. Record these below.

Organize your time: Some tips

- Learn to set limits and say “no.”
- Minimize time wasters. Cut back on television, unnecessary checking of voice mail and e-mail, unproductive meetings, activities that lack direction, and overly ambitious goals.
- Use time more efficiently. Double up on activities (e.g. make a “to-do” list while waiting in line), watch television while doing housework, match your tasks to your varying energy level (e.g. save challenging tasks for when you have high energy and routine, mundane tasks for when your energy is lower).
- Purchase a time organizer and learn to use it.
- Don’t waste time on decisions with equal consequences. Flip a coin and get on with it.
- Make daily goals and longer-range plans. Review these regularly.
- Plan phone calls better. If someone is unavailable, find out the best time to call back or leave your number and a time to reach you. Don’t “hold” unreasonably long, agree when to ring back or leave a message.
- Handle interruptions assertively. Let others know your time constraints. Politely say “I only have a few minutes to discuss this.” Or meet others in their office so that you can leave when you need to.
- Arrange breaks when you cannot work effectively.
- Protect your time. Let others know when you are available and for how long, and when you are not. Protect and defend this time vigorously.
- Don’t postpone what you don’t like to do. The more you procrastinate, the harder the job will be to get done and the more stress you will experience until it is finished.
VI. Get Active

This may surprise you, but a proven research finding is that one of the most effective ways to improve your health and alleviate stress, worry, sadness, and even anger, is through regular activity and exercise.

Just about any kind of activity or exercise is helpful (e.g. walking, cycling, tennis, even gardening) because it helps release tension, helps clear your mind of distressing thoughts, and improves your overall fitness level.

An ideal combination of activity involves aerobic, stretching, and toning exercises.

- Aerobic activity involves repetitive movements of large muscle groups. This kind of activity helps strengthen your cardiovascular system and increase stamina. Examples include jogging, swimming, brisk walking, bicycling, and tennis.
- Stretching activity is slow, sustained, and relaxing. The goal is to decrease muscle tension, improve flexibility, and maintain joint mobility. Yoga is a good example of stretching.
- Toning activities focus on firming specific muscle groups. Examples include weight lifting (resistance training), sit-ups, stomach crunches, and push-ups.

Step 1: Determine your pre-activity fitness level

If you are not used to exerting yourself, be cautious before increasing your activity level because it can lead to injury (e.g. muscle strain) which, in turn, could frustrate you.

If you lead a fairly sedentary lifestyle, are overweight, smoke, or have any limiting health conditions, always increase your activity levels slowly (e.g. increase your distance or pace of walking very gradually over time).

A good way to determine your readiness for activity, and the amount and frequency of activity that will be helpful for you, is to consult your doctor or health care provider.

Additionally, consult your doctor if any of the following symptoms emerge during activity: dizziness, irregular heart beats, a tightness or pressure in your chest, shoulders, arms, or neck, or if you feel extreme exhaustion or breathlessness after you have stopped the activity.

Otherwise, if all systems are go, proceed to step 2!

Step 2: Consider these questions

When planning to increase your activity level, consider these kinds of questions:

- Do you want to improve cardiovascular functioning or weight management (emphasis on aerobic activities), muscle flexibility (emphasis on stretching), or improve tone and strength (strengthening activities)? Or some combination of these?
- Do you prefer indoor or outdoor activity? Being alone or with others? Competition (e.g. sports) or not?
- How much time are you willing to devote to improving your activity level and controlling your stress? What time of day is best for you to be active?
Step 3: Consider your activity options

Activities of light intensity include:

- strolling
- gardening
- playing Frisbee
- bowling
- yoga (gentle forms, e.g. Hatha yoga)

Activities of moderate intensity include:

- brisk walking
- biking
- dancing
- push-ups or sit-ups or light weight lifting
- climbing stairs
- tennis
- in-line skating
- swimming
- yoga (moderate forms, e.g. PowerYoga or Ashtanga Yoga)

Activities of vigorous intensity include:

- jogging
- aerobics
- yoga (power forms)
- jumping jacks
- soccer
- squash
- rope jumping

Step 4: Establish activity goals

Consider the information from the preceding steps and set some specific goals for yourself.

For example, if you like to exercise with others and have a daily lunch break, consider a brisk walk with friends for half of your break (the other for eating your lunch). Be sure that your goals are specific, achievable, and motivating.

Use the space below to record your activity goals for the upcoming week, two weeks from now, and one month from now.
Step 5: Identify any obstacles to increasing your activity level

What might interfere with your plans or goals for increased activity (e.g. motivation, forgetfulness, lack of equipment, lack of time, uncertain how to perform an activity)?

Describe your potential obstacles in the space below and how you will deal with them if they arise.

For example: “My biggest obstacle is motivation. So I will plan to exercise with a friend and we will help motivate each other.”

Step 6: Track your progress with a daily activity diary

Successful change requires that you track your progress so that you know when you are being successful at increasing your activity level.

A daily activity diary can help. Here, you record:

- Your activity throughout the day, including a description of the activity.
- The duration and intensity of the activity.
- Any comments or thoughts you had before, during, and after the activity.

At the end of this action plan there is a “daily activity diary” that you can use. Photocopy or print extra copies for yourself and use these as long as you like or until activity becomes a habit in your life and you find that you no longer need to keep track of your progress.

Step 7: Reward yourself

Finally, a good action plan includes a reward to celebrate your success. How will you reward your progress? How often will you reward yourself? Use the space below to describe your plan to reward yourself.

For example: “At the end of a successful week of lunch-break walking, I will reward myself by going to a movie with a friend” or “when I finish two weeks of attending the regular yoga classes at my fitness centre, I will reward myself by shopping for some new clothing.”
Exercise/Daily Activity Diary

Week of:

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<th>Activity</th>
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<th>Comments (how did you feel afterwards)</th>
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VII. Getting More Help

Nobody is an expert at handling all of life's challenges and difficulties. Sometimes it just seems that no matter what you try on your own, it just isn't enough. Sometimes it's because you're not trying the right strategy and sometimes it's because there's just too much happening in your life all at once. So it's important to consider getting professional help.

You should consider getting professional help if any of the following are true:

- You feel emotionally overwhelmed.
- You are very concerned about your physical or emotional health.
- Your own effort at solving your problems is not working quickly or effectively.
- You notice that your suffering is significantly affecting your work or the lives of people that are important to you.

What kind of professional advice is helpful?

There are many kinds of professionals who provide counseling and related assistance. These include:

- Psychologists and counsellors (e.g. registered clinical counsellors or social workers with a private practice designation)
- Health care practitioners (e.g. your family doctor)
- Occupational health nurses
- Employee Assistance professionals
- A spiritual adviser (depending on your religious affiliation, e.g., a minister, priest or other cleric)

Depending on the community where you live, you may also find community services and self-help groups available to you.

How to choose a therapist

For many people, the best choice for help is from a professional counsellor or therapist (e.g. a registered psychologist).

To help choose the right therapist for you, consider asking potential therapists the following:

- Do you have a current license to practice counselling or psychology? What is your educational and professional background?
- What experience do you have with helping people who have concerns like mine?
- How will you know which treatment approach is best for me?
- How will you know if the treatment is working? How will I know?
- What are your fees? Are there any reimbursements available to me (e.g. through an employee assistance program offered by your employer)?
- When are you available for appointments? What about after-hours calls?
- What is your cancellation policy?
- What is your policy on confidentiality and privacy of the information we discuss?
Guidelines to surfing the internet

The internet offers a wealth of information, not all of it useful.

Be cautious when following advice from an internet resource and be sure to seek professional advice before making any important changes in your own life. Consider the following:

- Who authored the information?
- What is the information and advice based on? (The best information is based on research evidence and generally accepted clinical practice guidelines).
- How current is the information? When was the information last updated?
- Who is funding the site? (Be most wary of advice offered by for-profit commercial ventures that are not affiliated with a professional health-related organization).

Finally, do not self-diagnose based on internet-delivered information. The internet should only be used as a supplement to professional advice. Consider discussing your findings with a health professional and ask them how to best incorporate that information into your plan for self-care or self-improvement.
Stress improvement journal

To help you keep track of your level of stress and any changes over time (e.g. before and after practicing a stress management technique) you will use the following scale.

The scale ranges from 0 (no stress or tension at all, completely calm) to 10 (extremely stressed, the most stress or tension I have ever felt). The numbers are guideposts. You can choose to mark the scale at any point between 0 and 10. Just mark the scale at whatever point best describes your experience.

Note: In order to be most useful and practical, the scale is a summation of your stress experience. For example, you may experience stress as something other than `tension.` Therefore, use your own judgment when using this scale. If you need to customize it to fit your unique situation, feel free to do that. For example, you may interpret the scale to range from 0 (none of my symptoms of stress) to 10 (all of my symptoms of stress).

The scale you will use looks like this:

Use this 10-point scale before and after you practice a relaxation technique.

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<td>Most stress I have felt.</td>
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Stress improvement journal

For each day you are practicing a technique from this course, keep a record of where and when you used that technique (i.e. the circumstances or event) and how stressed you felt before and after using the technique.

Use the following scale to rate your level of stress:

Use this 10-point scale before and after you practice a relaxation technique.

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